



Dialego, Philosophy, and Class Struggle

In 1976, in the year of the Soweto uprising, ten years after the “Tricontinental”, four articles were published in the African Communist, written by [John Hoffman](#) under the pen-name “Dialego”. The first two are linked below, as our main texts for today.

Hoffman still teaches philosophy as an Emeritus Professor at Leicester University in England. He is no longer trying to be a revolutionary, but is an overt liberal these days. His liberalism of today is foreshadowed in these works of three and a half decades ago. His liberalism, now, is a child of his “Dialectical Materialism”, then. “Dialectical Materialism” is not always revolutionary. It can also be liberal. We will develop this argument in due course.

Hoffman’s four articles were subsequently republished, more than once, as a set, in a booklet. (Click here for [Part 3](#) and [Part](#)

[4](#) if required). The articles were popular with MK and are still famous. They certainly raised the banner of theory high. But they contained major deficiencies, of which the principal one is “Dialectical Materialism” itself, as presented by Dialego.

Hoffman (in his Part 2) writes of “Materialism vs. Idealism: the Basic Question of Philosophy”. But the Fundamental Question of Philosophy is the relation of the Subject to the Object, and not “Materialism vs. Idealism”. Glaring errors arise if and when these two different formulations are conflated into one.

For example, going back to Hoffman’s Part 1 under “Philosophy and Our ‘Experience’”, Hoffman writes about “stress[ing] the materialist component of our philosophy at the expense of the dialectical”. This is a muddle. What he is describing is what he himself is doing: idealising the objective factors of a situation, while all but eliminating the human Subject.

An original causation is demanded, which then has to be given a higher status than all else. Out goes God the Creator; in come the atoms and the molecules.

In this way of thinking (dialectical materialism) the atoms and the molecules, the inanimate *a priori* material, take precedence over life. This is “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” dressed up as revolutionary theory. But it cannot be.

Revolution is a quality of life, not ashes.

The dialectic that is political is the one between subjective

humans and the objective universe (which is indeed material). In this political dialectic, the human Subject is “**the point**”.

As Marx wrote in the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; **the point** is to change it.” Who’s point is that? It is our point. It is the human beings’ point. We are humanists. We are on the side of the humans, and of their humanity, which we ourselves have created and continue to create out of the world’s mud, through labour.

A purely material event is like a tree falling in the forest, unseen and unheard by anyone. It is an event, but it is not a political event.

Similarly, a switch from an imaginary world of superstition, to one that fetishises inert material, is no gain at all. These are merely two different forms of idealism.

In both these latter cases, powers are held up that are higher than people, whether the powers are invisible or visible. But in politics, the power that matters is people-power. For sure, that means people-power in a real, material world. But it does not mean a “balancing act” between the human and the inhuman.

There is no dialectic of the ideal versus the material. These two categories are not interdependent, but constitute alternatives: either/or.

But there is certainly a dialectic of the Subject and the Object,

because these two categories define each other. They are inseparable in their opposition to one another. But people still come first. People have priority. The Subject, who labours, is what it is all about, and not the material Object.

Hoffman's (then) devotion to "materialism" led him to write that *"[man] developed out of the world of nature through a long process of evolution and his ideas are the product of the mental activity of his brain, itself a highly developed and complex form of matter."*

How does a "complex form of matter" become human? Actually, it is not even necessary to ask. It is only Hoffman's kind of "materialism" that leads to such miserable, reductionist questions: questions that run away from humanity.

The atoms and the molecules may be taken as "given", whether by God or by chance. But humanity is special, while matter is only matter. Humanity is historical, while matter is infinite. Humanity is revolutionary work-in-progress. Humanity is what humans make. Making humanity is what humans do. It is the free-willing human Subject that is at the centre of our consciousness, our concerns, our morality, and our politics.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-texts: [Dialego, Parts 1, Necessity of Theory, 1976, John Hoffman](#) and [Dialego, Part 2, Theory of Action, 1976, John Hoffman](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).